

THE POET OF PROSE

It is extraordinary what prosaic people
poets can be;
or, if you like, what prosaic people can be
poets. This
paradox has long become a platitude; yet
there are mo-
ments when it can still make us rub
astonished eyes. We
may remind ourselves that even Byron is
most unlikely
to be pacing his chamber in the throes of
Manfred the
morning we meet him; as Byron himself
said: 'I never
can get people to understand that poetry is
the expression
of excited emotion, and that there is no
such thing as a
life of passion any more than a continual
earthquake

Besides, who would ever shave themselves in
such a state?³
It is obvious; and yet we can sympathise so
well with
Mr. Coolidge of Boston in his Hi-concealed
disappoint-
ment at the author of *Childe Harold*, 'having
expected to
meet a misanthropical gendeman in wolfskin
breeches,
answering in fierce monosyllables, instead of
a man of
this world'. Yet, in fact, few poets have lived
their part
as romantically as Byron; shall we ever grow
used to the
far wider contrast between *Tintern Abbey*
and the hum-
drum, horse-faced personage who wrote it,
between the
Ancient Mariner and the flaccid, snub-nosed
countenance
of Coleridge?

There is often an equally incongruous
contrast between
peoples or landscapes and the literature
they produce.

How much more poetry the reader of
history might
naturally expect from the country of
Frangois I and Napoleon III,
Bayard, of Napoleon I and Napoleon III,
than from the
country of Henry VIII and Oliver Cromwell, of
George IV
and Queen Victoria! No doubt such
generalisations are
too easy; by choosing one's examples
tactfully one can